

**Testimony Before the Montgomery County Council  
Board of Health  
March 26, 2021**

**Public Hearing:  
Board of Health Regulation concerning the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines in  
Montgomery County**

**Testimony from:  
Marissa Ditkowsky, Montgomery County Resident**

My name is Marissa Ditkowsky, and I am a resident of Montgomery County. As a high-risk, disabled person, navigating this pandemic has been isolating, traumatizing, and incredibly difficult. With individuals not taking restrictions to heart; instances of medical rationing; and so many of our friends, advocates, and colleagues dying; it is clear to us that the lives of disabled individuals have been deemed disposable. Disabled people have continued to be overlooked and ignored in vaccine distribution. We have not been prioritized in the distribution process despite our high-risk status. Websites with information and intended for registration have not been accessible and do not contain clear or consistent information. Physical vaccination sites are not accessible. Transportation to and from vaccination sites is an accessibility concern. In Maryland specifically, the decentralized nature of vaccine registration has left disabled residents exhausted and in pain trying, and failing, to schedule with dozens of different providers. I experienced flares of pain, migraines, and increased symptoms trying to schedule a vaccine appointment. I was eligible according to the State of Maryland for over a month before I was able to find an appointment.

At the time I received my vaccine, I was still unable to acquire an appointment through the county. The county was still only providing appointments to older adults. It was not providing vaccines to people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, even though the State of Maryland had reached Phase 1B. However, the county might have been the most accessible and centralized method of finding an appointment for many disabled individuals, particularly given the severe lack of state-run facilities, and in particular, state-run facilities easily accessible to Montgomery County residents who cannot easily travel or transport themselves.

When I became eligible to receive my vaccine due to my developmental disability, many other disabled individuals at just as high a risk were not yet eligible due to arbitrary standards set by the state and county. Many of these individuals experience similar symptoms to those caused by my developmental disability. These individuals, like me, had been scared and isolated throughout the entire pandemic.

Given racial and other disparities throughout Montgomery County, I am not opposed to prioritizing vaccination by zip code. If Montgomery County wishes to prioritize by zip code, it should also seek to expand clinics that go out into the community. They are more accessible mobility-wise, and they also address issues involving any inaccessibility of registration. Simply put, these types of clinics are more efficient logistically for community members and in terms of

execution. We need to meet residents where they are, which has been a significant failure of vaccine administration thus far.

However, it is unconscionable to lower age eligibilities before the county has even considered expanding eligibility to disabled residents with chronic health conditions and comorbidities when so many individuals with comorbidities are at a much higher risk. Additionally, the county website currently only lists individuals with developmental disabilities under Priority Group 1B, Tier 2, as opposed to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The State of Maryland has prioritized both individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in its 1B phase. I am calling on the county to clarify this matter.

I am also calling on the county to eradicate the distinction between licensed and unlicensed caregivers. Many people with disabilities do not have licensed caregivers, including family members and friends. These individuals may be putting disabled individuals at risk by not getting vaccinated due to their continued work with disabled individuals, any errands they might have to do for the disabled person in this time, and other factors. However, only licensed caregivers and health care professionals are entitled to a vaccine at this time. Disabled people will continue to be placed at risk until this distinction is eradicated. By expanding the age before eradicating this distinction, the county also makes an intentional decision to continue to put disabled lives at risk.

In conclusion, I am not opposed to prioritization by zip code. However, I am opposed to expansion of the age group for prioritization prior to expansion to individuals with comorbidities. I would also encourage the eradication of the distinction between licensed and unlicensed caregivers. I urge the county to investigate and correct the fact that individuals with intellectual disabilities are not listed under Group 1B, Tier 2. Finally, if the county wishes to prioritize by zip code, more clinics that go out into the community should occur. Since the goal would be to prioritize individuals based upon where they live, not only does it make sense, but it also increases accessibility and decreases issues with registration for disabled folks, BIPOC, and individuals with lower incomes.

Our county has the opportunity to create access where the State of Maryland has failed. Maryland has failed to take accountability and placed responsibility on the counties. Montgomery County can, and must, do better.